

Origins of the National Capital

SUMMARY

The American Revolution ended the colonial era of the United States' history. Little fighting took place in the Potomac region, but the war's outcome affected the area greatly. After a period of weak government under the Articles of Confederation, the new nation approved a stronger Constitution. This charter provided that a federal district or capital be established and governed by Congress. After much political compromise, Congress in 1790 chose a site on the Potomac River to be the capital. Congress also gave the president the power to select the exact location, appoint a government, and oversee planning for the federal district.

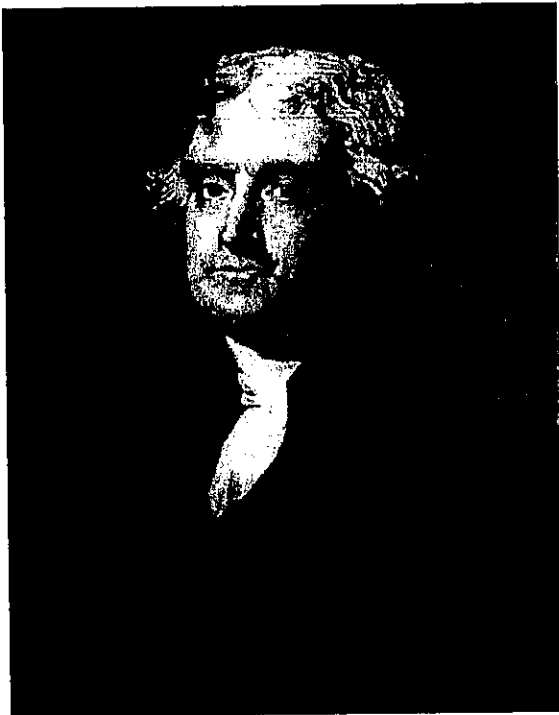
President George Washington chose for the capital a site located near the falls of the Potomac. The capital would incorporate the established towns of Alexandria and Georgetown, and be carved from lands in both Maryland and Virginia. Washington persuaded landowners of the new city to turn much of their property over to the federal government. Besides the ground needed for government use, much of the land would be sold to provide funds to pay for public construction. Washington appointed commissioners to administer the district. He also chose Andrew Ellicott to survey the city. Benjamin Banneker, a free African American and scientist, assisted in the survey. Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French architect, was chosen to provide a grand plan for the city. L'Enfant succeeded in producing a magnificent plan, but he was dismissed in 1792 because he clashed with the city commissioners.

Land sales in the city were very slow and the resulting lack of funds hampered construction of federal buildings. Major land speculators who invested in the city were unable to make their payments. Despite these setbacks, the President's House, designed by James Hoban, was constructed during the 1790s. Construction of the Capitol building, under supervision of several architects, proceeded so slowly that only one wing was finished in 1800 when Congress moved the capital from Philadelphia. When it officially became the federal capital in 1800, the new city of Washington was a raw, unfinished place. However, it had splendid possibilities.

Main Ideas in This Chapter

1. In 1790, Congress chose a permanent site on the Potomac River for the capital of the United States.
2. The 10-mile-square site was made up of land ceded for a federal district from the states of Virginia and Maryland.
3. The District was located on the fall line. The District included the already settled tobacco ports of Alexandria and Georgetown.
4. A planned city named Washington City was surveyed by Andrew Ellicott and Benjamin Banneker. Pierre Charles L'Enfant developed a grand plan for the city involving a grid pattern with wide avenues radiating from circles and squares crossing the grid.
5. Construction of Washington City progressed slowly.

- What were the Fairfax Resolves?
- What were some of the events that led to the establishment of a permanent site for the capital of the United States?



The Constitution of the United States provided that a federal district be established as a capital for the new nation. Thomas Jefferson played a major role in the reaching of a compromise between northerners and southerners that located the nation's capital in the South.

1. A New Nation

Revolution and Independence

When Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence "that these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be *Free and Independent States*," he announced the birth of a new nation. It was not an easy birth. It began with struggle—years of disputes and a six-year war. The disputes and war, except for two interesting situations, had little direct impact on the Potomac region.

In 1774, colonial opposition to English rule was nearing a climax. The freemen of Fairfax County, Virginia, gathered on a July day at Alexandria to vote on resolutions written by George Mason. Mason, a wealthy planter, lived south of Alexandria, where his plantation house, Gunston Hall, has been preserved. The men of Fairfax approved Mason's document, which became known as the "Fairfax Resolves." The resolves announced a determination to resist, with every means "which Heaven hath given us," the English government's attempt to "extort from us our money without our Consent."

In 1775 the men of Fairfax voted to form the "Fairfax Independent Company," Virginia's first county militia unit. The group chose George Washington as its commander. He was shortly to become commander-in-chief of the Continental Army.

War came to the Potomac region in 1775. Lord Dunmore, royal governor of Virginia, struck the first blow for England, offering freedom to all slaves of "rebels" who would join his forces. Five hundred black men answered his first call. During the summer of 1776 Dunmore's small fighting force sailed up the Potomac as far as Occoquan, south of Alexandria near George Mason's plantation.

Dunmore's "invasion" triggered the only fighting to take place on the middle Potomac during the Revolution. His policy of recruiting black people stimulated several colonies to actively seek black fighting men. Approximately 5,000 African Americans from all the colonies fought on the patriot side.

The American Confederation

Peace came in 1783. The 13 coastal colonies were declared free and independent of Great Britain. At first, however, the new nation had a weak government and no capital city. The several states retained all powers of government except those few they delegated to the national officials.

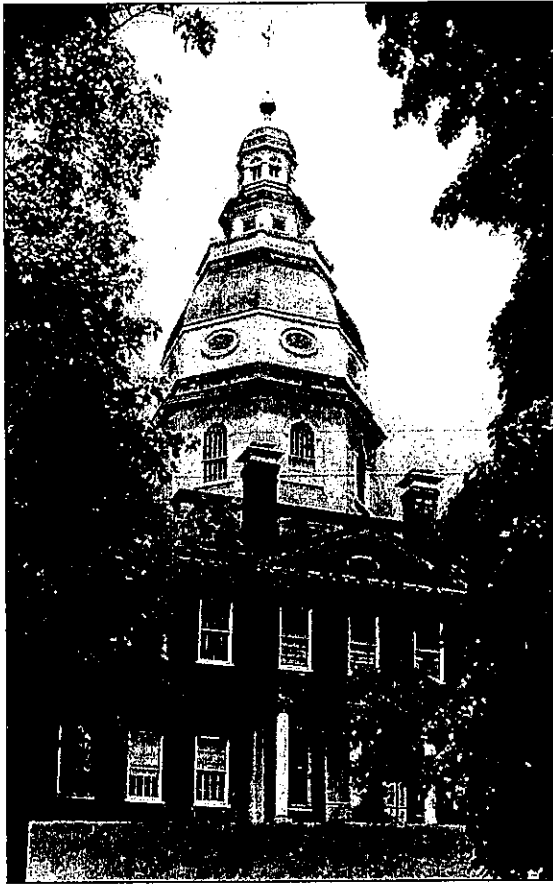
An event in 1783 highlighted some of the difficulties facing the new national government. A crowd of angry soldiers, veterans of the Revolution, marched into Philadelphia, where Congress was sitting, to demand their back pay. Congress asked the Executive Council of the state of Pennsylvania to help control the **mutinous** veterans and uphold the public authority of Congress. The state officials refused to call out the militia. This response annoyed and embarrassed members of Congress. Although they represented the federal government, the highest power in the United States, they had to beg for protection by local authorities who turned them down. It was a disgrace to the nation. Congress voted to leave Philadelphia and adjourn to the safety of Princeton, New Jersey.

The episode in Philadelphia reinforced the already spreading idea that the nation's capital, wherever it was, should be controlled by the national government. People also became convinced that it was not good for Congress to keep moving around from one city or town to another. But Congress and the citizens could not agree where the seat of government should be located. Every state seemed to want the capital, and **sectionalism** prevented any solution. By the time Congress returned to Philadelphia in 1790, it had met in Princeton and Trenton in New Jersey, York and Lancaster in Pennsylvania, Baltimore and Annapolis in Maryland, and New York City.

Critics of Congress had other reasons to be displeased with the national government. Too often, members did not show up for meetings. When it did act, Congress accomplished little because most power was left to the states. States sometimes acted in ways that hurt their neighbors and the Union as a whole. Nationalists who wanted to strengthen the federal authority had little hope that the government could deal with internal and external dangers.

The Constitution

Representatives of Virginia and Maryland had been concerned over the need for interstate cooperation to deal with issues of fishing and trading along the Potomac River. In 1786 they called a meeting at Annapolis to discuss mutual problems. Only five states sent representatives. Another convention was called to meet at Philadelphia in May 1787. At that meeting, the Annapolis delegates decided, representatives of the states would discuss the need to strengthen the Articles of Confederation. They wrote a new gov-



The State House at Annapolis, one of the sites that served as the nation's capital

erning document—a constitution limiting the powers of the states and giving new power to the federal government.

Although the delegates argued long and hard about many details of the new government, there was little disagreement about the need for a fixed, secure capital. Section 8 of Article 1 of the Constitution gave Congress power to set up a “district not exceeding ten miles square” to be “the seat of the government of the United States.” In that district Congress was to “exercise jurisdiction in all cases whatsoever.” Thus, the nation’s permanent capital would be, at most, 10 miles on a side, or 100 square miles—a kind of city-state controlled by the national authorities. It would be as permanent, as strong, as grand as the newly reconstituted American federation itself hoped to be.

2. The Federal District

Locating the Capital

The states ratified the Constitution in 1788. The compact did not say where the federal district was to be located but left that decision to Congress. In 1789, when the first Congress elected under the new Constitution met in New York City, several states and cities offered sites for the capital. Representatives and senators argued for their favorites, but no one place was acceptable to a majority in both houses of Congress. The disagreement was basically sectional. Many congressmen agreed that the capital should be located near the center of the nation’s population and land area. A good location should be easy to protect from ships’ cannon fire, and should be on a river or a road leading to the western country.

The decision was difficult to make because congressmen were aware that, wherever it was placed, the area receiving the capital would gain wealth and political influence. Philadelphia, a northern city, met all the requirements for a capital site. **Agrarian** congressmen from the South, however, fought against placing the capital in a northern city with economic interests so different from their own. They preferred a location where slavery was legal, believing that it would protect the institution. The argument went back and forth.

Alexander Hamilton, President George Washington’s secretary of the treasury, wanted the federal government to stabilize the national economy. He hoped that Congress would agree to fund

- What powers did the Residence Act of 1790 give the president?
- What is the fall line? How does it affect the geography of the District of Columbia?
- How did George Washington get landowners to give up their property?

the debts still owed by some northern states for financing the Revolution. Congress could not agree on the issue and debate was so hot that some men talked of their states leaving the Union. One day, Hamilton met the Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson, on a New York City sidewalk. He poured out his story to the tall, red-haired Virginian. Jefferson listened carefully and said he would try to help. He invited Hamilton and two Virginia representatives to dinner and the group made a deal. The Virginians promised to vote for federal assumption of state debts, an action desired by northern money interests. In return, Hamilton promised to get northern support for a southern capital. Each side kept its part of the deal.

The Residence Act, which decided the location of the national capital, became law in 1790. It gave the president power to choose a spot for the capital on the Potomac River somewhere between the mouth of the Eastern Branch and the Conococheague Creek nearly 70 miles upstream. The president was also to appoint **commissioners** who would oversee the building of the capital city, and make laws for the federal district. The choice of city planners and other officers was also put in the president's hands. The states of Maryland and Virginia would each **cede** the necessary land to the federal government.

Congress believed it would take ten years—until 1800—for the new capital to be ready for the government. In the meantime Congress, the president, and the Supreme Court would do their business in Philadelphia. The people living in the federal district, according to legislation, would live under Maryland and Virginia laws until Congress decided otherwise. President George Washington quickly took charge of making the capital a reality.

A Site Prepared by Nature

A few months after passage of the Residence Act, President Washington made a tour of the Potomac valley, according to provisions of the act. He evaluated possible sites for the capital as far west as the Conococheague Creek near the present town of Williamsport, Maryland. He concluded that the most beneficial and natural location for a new city would be at the **head of navigation** on the Potomac River near the ports of Alexandria and Georgetown. As a native and lifelong resident of the Potomac region, Washington naturally preferred this site. But geographical conditions made his decision even more certain.



- Before 1800, eight cities served as the nation's capital. Look at the text, list them, and find them on the map.
- Why do you think that the capital moved so often?
- Why do you think that the eight cities are clustered in one area?



Great Falls, north of Washington on the Potomac River

- Locate it on the Griffith map on page 27.

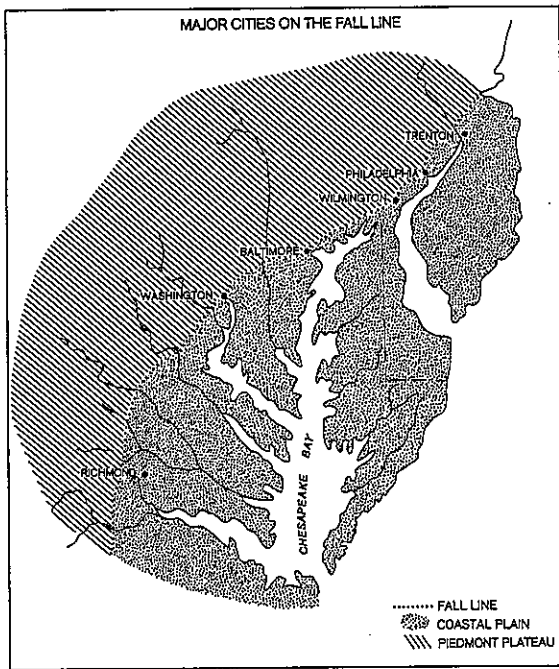
Just above Georgetown are the falls of the Potomac—a stretch of rocky rapids and shallow rough water extending for several miles up the river. Today we know Little Falls and Great Falls as principal features of this area. Here the Potomac crosses what geologists call the **fall line**. At the fall line the clays, sands, and soft rocks of the coastal plain, or tidewater, give way to the harder rocks of the piedmont plateau, or upland. Wherever a river crosses this geological formation a waterfall is created—hence the term “fall line.”

The fall line weaves irregularly through the District of Columbia. It can be seen anywhere in the northern half of the city where flat lowland rises to higher, hilly ground. Along the Potomac the fall line is visible at the Key Bridge. Georgetown University stands on the piedmont side of the line, while the Kennedy Center sits on the coastal plain side. Cardozo High School's location on 13th Street, NW, is on the fall line's upland edge. Bladensburg, beyond



The 10-mile-square district set aside for the capital, shown in a map drawn by Dennis Griffith in 1794.

- Locate the towns of Georgetown and Alexandria and the planned City of Washington. What two states contributed land?
- Compare the boundaries of the square in the center of the Griffith map with a modern map of the District of Columbia. How are the boundaries different?



- Why did towns develop on rivers below waterfalls?

the District line in far northeast D.C., is situated where the fall line crosses the upper Anacostia River. From these high points, the coastal plain stretches south and east to the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Beyond the fall line to the north and west, the piedmont plateau rises gradually to the Appalachian Mountains.

The fall line and the Potomac River influenced where settlement occurred in the area. They helped shape the economy, the politics, and even the lifestyle of its inhabitants. The Potomac River is a natural highway. The site below the Potomac's falls, where the Eastern Branch joined the bigger river, had several safe harbors and was crossed by a major north-south road. George Washington believed that the canal then being built by the Potomack Canal Company, in which he owned shares, would soon make the Potomac more useful as a trade route. The area was a natural meeting place and had been used by people at least since the days of the Indians at Nacotchtanke.

President Washington also believed that the new federal city would be far enough from the Atlantic to be safe from attack by an enemy navy. Fortifications could be built at narrow points in the river, along the hills near the southeast shore of the Eastern Branch, and above Georgetown. Washington liked the site because a 10-mile square laid out there would include Alexandria and Georgetown. These ports could supply the capital's needs while it was under construction. They might also help the federal city become a trading center. Having vital interests in commerce, the President hoped that the new city would become an **emporium**, a prosperous center of trade with the west. Geography, he concluded, made the site near the Potomac falls a natural location for the capital.

Washington Organizes the Federal District

Putting the District in motion and planning for the new city involved complicated and sensitive negotiations. Fearing the possibility of failure, President Washington became personally involved with the details of organizing the new District and appointed three commissioners to administer it. He proclaimed its exact boundaries, and he pushed through Congress the law necessary to bring Alexandria within these boundaries.

Washington made several key appointments. He secured Major Andrew Ellicott, a veteran of the Revolution, to survey and mark

BENJAMIN BANNEKER

Benjamin Banneker is one of the most interesting figures in the history of early Washington. An African American, he had been born free, and when he was a child his grandmother taught him how to read. His love of books and knowledge and his inquiring mind stayed with him all his life. As he grew older, he borrowed books to learn about mathematics and astronomy. He built a wooden clock by studying a pocket watch.

Banneker was a farmer as an adult. He combined his knowledge of farming, mathematics, and astronomy to write almanacs about the movements of the sun, moon, and stars. The books were to help other farmers determine the best times to plant and harvest their crops. In the final 17 years of his life, Banneker wrote 13 almanacs.

When he was 60 years old, Banneker was asked by Andrew Ellicott to help him survey the land for the new District of Columbia. The two men worked seven days a week for three months.

There have been many books and articles written about Benjamin Banneker. Some are about his work as an astronomer and a mathematician. Others deal with this work as an early American writer or his role in surveying the federal city. The following brief bibliography, prepared by the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center at Howard University, will lead you to more information about Benjamin Banneker.

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Major Andrew Ellicott began his survey of the District of Columbia in 1791.



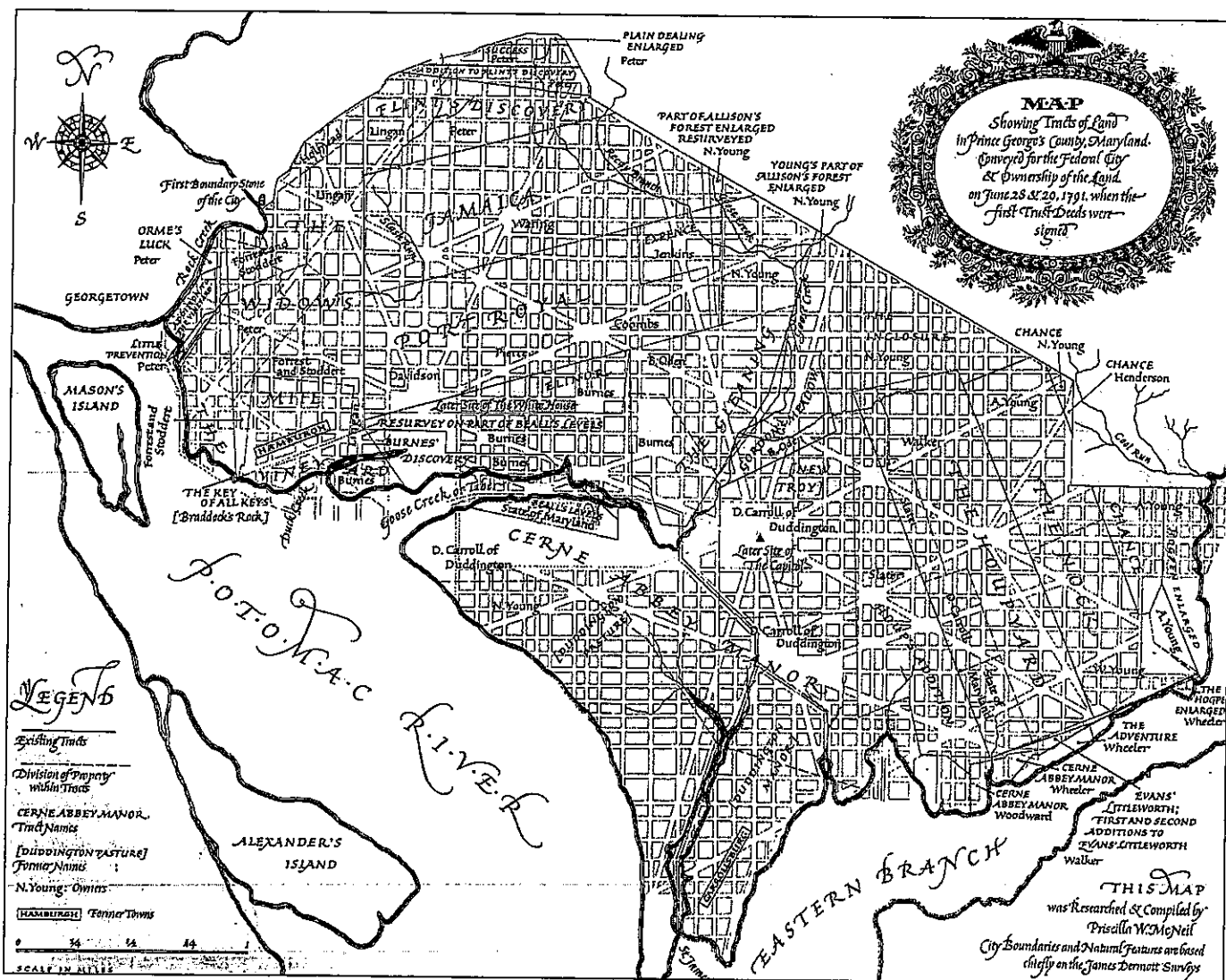
One of the original boundary stones of the District of Columbia

the boundaries and lay out streets and lots. Ellicott brought with him as an assistant Benjamin Banneker, a free African American scientist and mathematician. The president directed the surveyors to begin their work on the river just south of Alexandria. A different and more difficult job was that of designing or planning the city. For this task Washington chose a French architect, artist, and engineer, Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant. Washington knew L'Enfant, also a Revolutionary veteran, and his design work in New York City and elsewhere.

The next step in the capital's development required extreme care. Because the new nation had no new funds for construction of the capital, Washington planned to raise money by selling land in the new city. Washington had to convince landowners to donate part of their property to the federal government. Proceeds from the sales would be used for public buildings and other improvements.

Washington played a kind of game with the landowners, pleading with and threatening them to gain cooperation. If they would give up half their land, the half they retained would multiply in value and they would be much better off. If they did not give up half their property, no public buildings would be built near them and their land would be worth very little. The game worked. In the spring of 1791, the president announced that several thousand acres of land had been obtained by the government at very little cost to it. Besides this property, Washington secured gifts of \$120,000 from Virginia and \$72,000 from Maryland for construction of the new city.

Washington continued to take a detailed interest in the capital. He believed its success depended on his involvement. He knew that other cities such as Philadelphia and New York hoped for the capital to fail. They would again be in the running to be chosen as the seat of national government. The president worked closely with the commissioners in guiding the new city. He helped choose designers for the Capitol and the President's House. He helped promote interest in the city by advertising and praising it, participating in auctions of lots, buying lots for himself in different sections of town, and building a large house near the Capitol for rental. It is appropriate that the Commissioners decided to call the capital "The City of Washington."



This map, researched by Priscilla McNeil and drawn by Don Hawkins in 1991, shows private ownership of property in 1791 when the federal government began acquiring land for the District of Columbia. L'Enfant's plan for the future city is also seen.

David Burnes was the last original landholder to agree to the L'Enfant Plan. Legend has it that George Washington visited Burnes in his home near present-day Pennsylvania Avenue and 17th Street, NW, and convinced him to sell half his land to the federal government. This photograph of Burnes's house was taken shortly before demolition in the 1890s.



Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant

Writing to President Washington in 1789, L'Enfant expressed his vision for the new capital: "No nation perhaps had ever before the opportunity offered them of deliberately deciding on the spot where their Capital city should be fixed, or of combining every necessary consideration in the choice of situation. . . . It will be obvious that the plan should be drawn on such a scale as to leave room for that aggrandisement & embellishment which the increase of the wealth of the Nation will permit it to pursue at any period however remote."

3. A Planned City

The L'Enfant Plan

Pierre Charles L'Enfant was 36 years old, a native of France, an architect and engineer, and a former major in the American Continental Army. He was familiar with the grandeur of planned landscapes in France. L'Enfant's vision for the capital city of the United States was magnificent indeed.

The planner arrived at the site in March 1791 to begin his preliminary survey. As he rode over the landscape, up its heights and down into low points, he must have asked many questions: What are the most visible and important natural features? Where should the President's House be placed? Where should the streets run? Where should the city's residential and commercial centers be?

As L'Enfant saw them, the principal natural features of the site were the Tiber Creek (near present-day Constitution Avenue), a low ridge to the north of the creek, an abrupt hill to the east, and the broad Potomac and Eastern Branch to the south. The creek he hoped to transform into a canal for the use of freight barges. It would also be a **visual landmark**. He planned for a cascade, or artificial waterfall, to descend what is now Capitol Hill. The ridge and hill would be appropriate for public buildings. L'Enfant supposed that the waterfront would serve commercial wharves as well as a navy yard, an arsenal, and a marine hospital. The river would be a strong visual anchor for the whole city.

As for public buildings, L'Enfant quickly identified sites for the two critical ones. The President's House would be placed on the low ridge north of the Tiber Creek, where there was a splendid view of the Potomac. The Congress's House (Capitol) belonged on Jenkins Hill, which rises abruptly to the east of Tiber Creek and "which stands as a pedestal waiting for a monument," according to L'Enfant. To join the Congress's House and the President's House, the planner proposed a grand avenue, or public walk. This wide-open area would stretch westward from Jenkins Hill until it would form the walkway known today as the Mall at a point due south of the President's House.

The various public buildings and parts of the city would be connected by broad avenues radiating out from the President's House and other key locations. In addition to sites for principal federal buildings, L'Enfant provided for business, municipal functions, and

public monuments. He planned for all parts of the city to develop simultaneously, with each separate function contributing to a unified whole.

One unusual feature of L'Enfant's plan was the amount of space devoted to streets. The main streets or avenues were 160 feet wide. Secondary streets running in an uneven grid at right angles were 90 to 110 feet wide. So ample were these streets that they took up nearly twice the amount of land allowed for building lots.

The L'Enfant Plan incorporated several man-made elements existing on the site. Two well-used roads were already in place. One led from a ford, or crossing, of Rock Creek toward Bladensburg and became the city's northern boundary. Formerly called Boundary Street, much of it is now Florida Avenue. The other road, from the same Rock Creek ford to a ferry across the Eastern Branch, was partially incorporated into one of L'Enfant's broad avenues (now Pennsylvania Avenue). Two townsites, largely unoccupied, also became part of the plan: Carrollsburg was located on the Eastern Branch between sites for the navy yard and the arsenal; Hamburg, or Funkstown, stood near the mouth of Rock Creek.

L'Enfant's Dismissal

The L'Enfant Plan was truly inspired and monumental in every sense of the word. Its basic outlines were developed in a remarkably short time. In June 1791, after only a few months on the job, the planner showed President Washington a sketch of his ideas. Taking Washington's suggestions, L'Enfant refined the plan. Within a few months, however, problems arose.

Washington found himself in the middle of a series of disputes between the planner and the district commissioners. The Frenchman would not follow instructions if he felt they interfered with his aesthetic judgments. In October 1791, at a sale of lots, L'Enfant refused to produce a map of the city. He felt that the sale was premature, and that financial needs were not so critical as the commissioners felt they were.

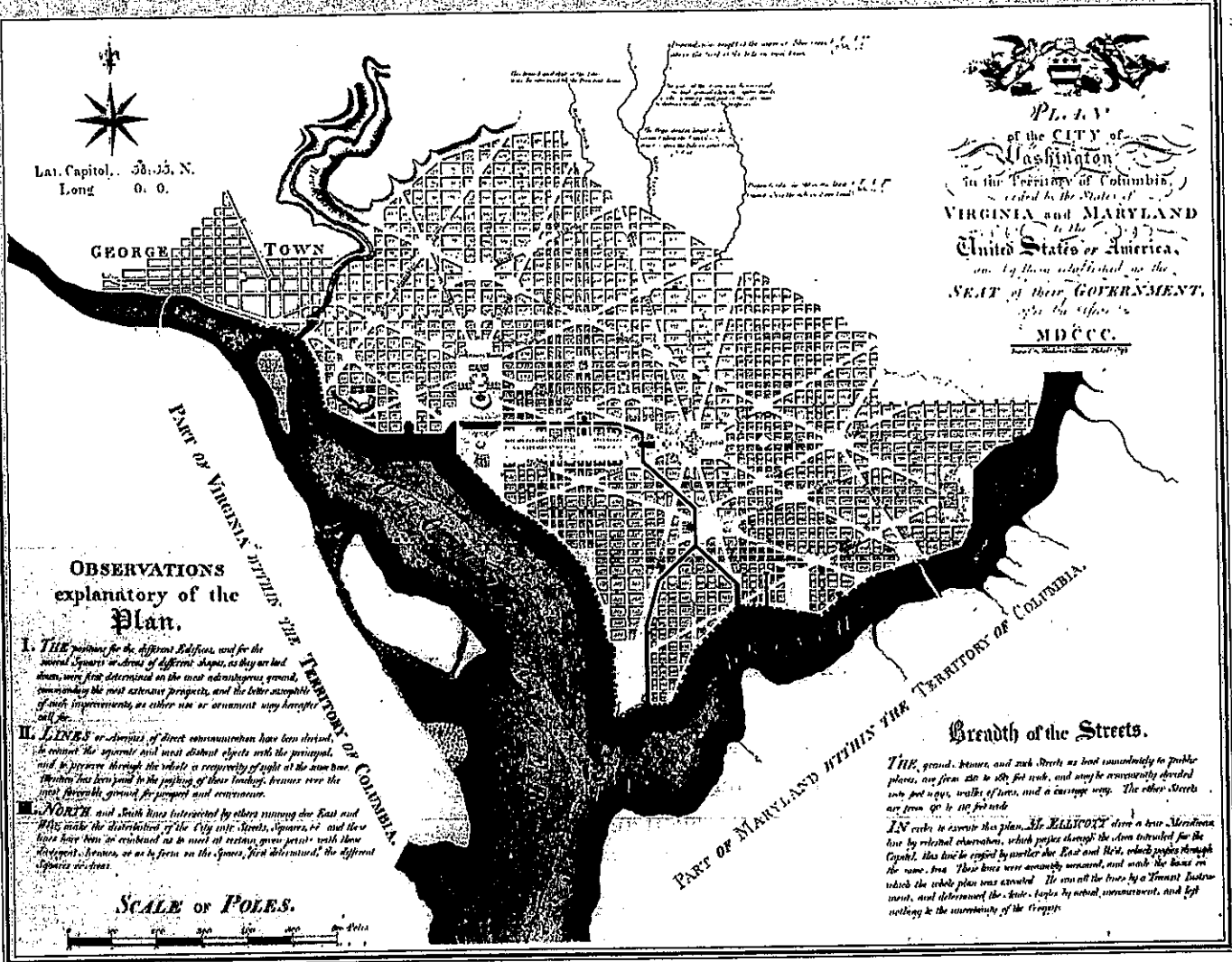
Later in the year L'Enfant became furious that a house being constructed in the city interfered with his plan. Daniel Carroll of Duddington was constructing a new mansion on Capitol Hill that intruded into the planned roadway of New Jersey Avenue. L'Enfant ordered the building removed and was refused by the owner.

PLANS FOR THE NATION'S CAPITAL

Some people thought that Pierre L'Enfant's plan was too grand. In most American cities and towns of the period, the streets formed a small pattern along the waterfront. L'Enfant's plan was for the whole city. He used the topography and the existing roads of the site in his plan. L'Enfant placed the Capitol and the President's House more than a mile apart. In the Jefferson

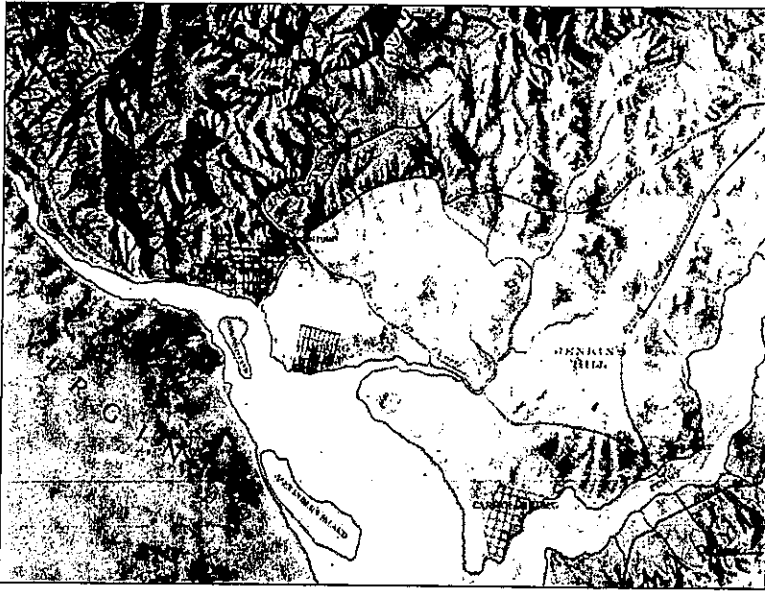
plan, the capital would have fit in a small area just southeast of Georgetown. The President's House and the Capitol are close together on "Tyber" Creek.

• After you look at these maps and plans, draw a plan for a new city that will still be impressive 200 years from now.



This engraved version of Pierre Charles L'Enfant's design of the national capital reflects changes suggested to surveyor Andrew Ellicott by Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson in the spring of 1792. Massachusetts Avenue was straightened and the park north of the President's House changed from a semicircle to a rectangle.

• Compare Ellicott's map with a modern map of Washington, D.C. What differences can you find?



Topography and old roads, 1791

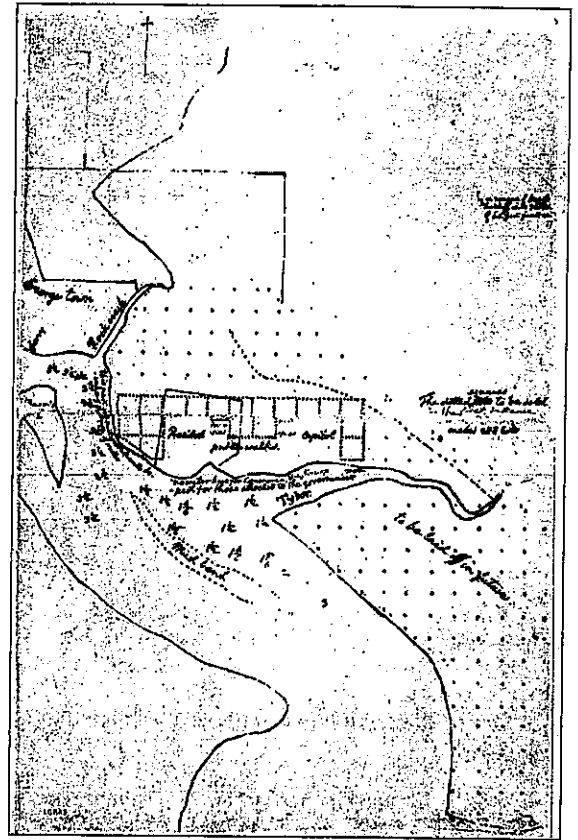
- Compare this map with a current one. Which major modern streets follow the routes of the road to Bladensburg?

He then had workers in his service demolish the Carroll mansion. Carroll was furious and complained to President Washington, who reprimanded L'Enfant strongly. The situation reached its lowest point when L'Enfant ordered his subordinates to defy the district commissioners. In February 1792, with a heavy heart, Washington dismissed the talented planner.

Plans left by L'Enfant when he was fired were incomplete. His descriptions and notes, however, provided the sense and grand scope of his aims. President Washington asked Ellicott, the surveyor, to prepare a usable city map based on the L'Enfant Plan. In 1792 and 1793, using his notes and those of his assistant, Benjamin Banneker, Ellicott produced two maps that essentially followed the plan. A few diagonal avenues were omitted and a few others straightened, but Ellicott's version of the L'Enfant Plan is what later designers have followed.

The Plan's Significance

City planning was not a new idea when L'Enfant designed the national capital. American colonial cities, such as Philadelphia, Annapolis, and Savannah, had been designed. Even the towns of Williamsburg, Alexandria, and Georgetown were systematically arranged and laid out. What set the federal city's plan apart was its



Thomas Jefferson proposed a federal city of 300 acres, compared to L'Enfant's plan of 6,111 acres. Jefferson's design was a checkerboard in which public gardens alternated with house lots to minimize the potential spread of fire and disease.

- If you were choosing the design for a new nation's capital, which plan would you choose—L'Enfant's or Jefferson's?

daring in the face of financial and political obstacles. L'Enfant followed his imagination and designed an ideal city of spectacular beauty. Unfortunately, the completion of his ideal was beyond the means of the young country he served.

How did the plan survive? George Washington saved it in the early years. The plan was half-forgotten through much of the nineteenth century, as amendments and additions were made. Many institutions such as railroads, public buildings, private enterprises, and freeways would be placed so as to cut off some of the plan's visual features and pleasures. The city grew in a haphazard way and not in the orderly manner as L'Enfant had hoped. The plan remained, however, and would inspire later designers, planners, and preservationists.

4. A City Under Construction

Real Estate Development and Speculation

- How did land speculation affect the early growth of Washington?
- How were the original designs for the Capitol and the President's House chosen?

Early land sales in the federal district were disappointing and produced little revenue. Desperate for funds, the commissioners agreed in 1793 to sell 3,000 lots to William Greenleaf, a wealthy financier and land speculator. Greenleaf agreed to construct a number of houses each year, pay installments on the lots, and lend money to the commissioners to construct public buildings. Similar deals were made with Robert Morris and John Nicholson.

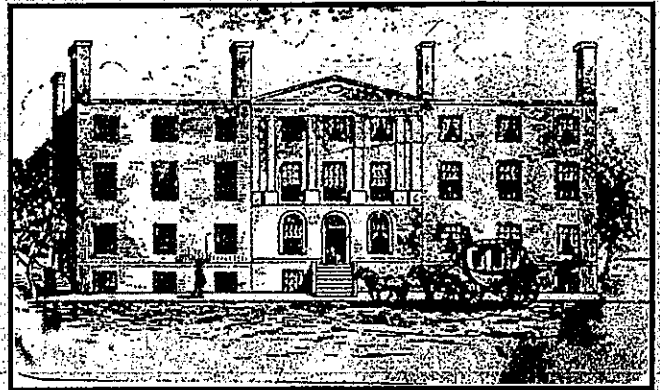
Speculators gained control of more than a third of the land for sale in the new city. Lot prices rose. Speculators began building several groups of substantial houses in the city. Greenleaf built a brick row known as "Six Buildings" on Pennsylvania Avenue and 22nd Street, NW. Robert Morris financed the "Seven Buildings" row near Pennsylvania Avenue and 19th Street. More ambitious was a group of "Twenty Buildings" at South Capitol and N Streets. Promoted with a grand celebration in 1796, these fine brick houses were never completed and shortly fell into decay.

Greenleaf and his partners created a land bubble—an empty investment scheme. Without using much cash, they had acquired thousands of lots, hoping that cash buyers would appear. This did not happen, nor were foreign bankers interested in their lands. The speculators fell far behind in payments to the commissioners. In 1797 they went into bankruptcy and Robert Morris, once the wealthiest man in America, was taken off to debtor's prison. The

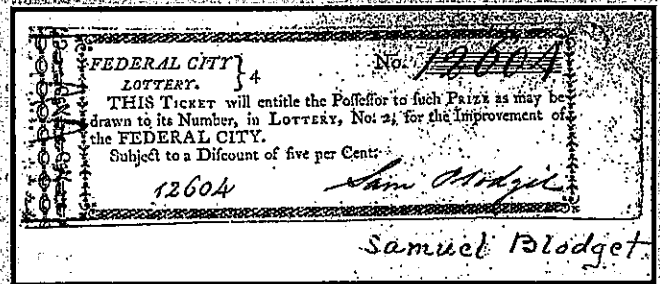
BLODGETT'S HOTEL

The story of Blodgett's Hotel is a tale about speculation that has a slightly happier ending than those of the "Six Buildings," the "Seven Buildings," and the "Twenty Buildings." Built around 1796 by a real estate developer named Samuel Blodgett, Jr., Blodgett's Hotel was the largest privately owned structure in the city during the 1790s. Blodgett owned several hundred acres of choice lots and, in order to promote sales, he planned to hold a lottery in which this grand hotel would be the first prize. Before carrying out the lottery, Blodgett went bankrupt. The building stood on the corner of 8th and E Streets, NW, unfinished. Then in 1800, it opened as the United States Theatre. About 1810 it was purchased by the federal government and converted for use by the Post Office and Patent Office. It served in this manner until destroyed by fire in 1836. It was even a temporary home for Congress in 1814–1815. Samuel Blodgett, Jr., died in 1814, penniless and forgotten.

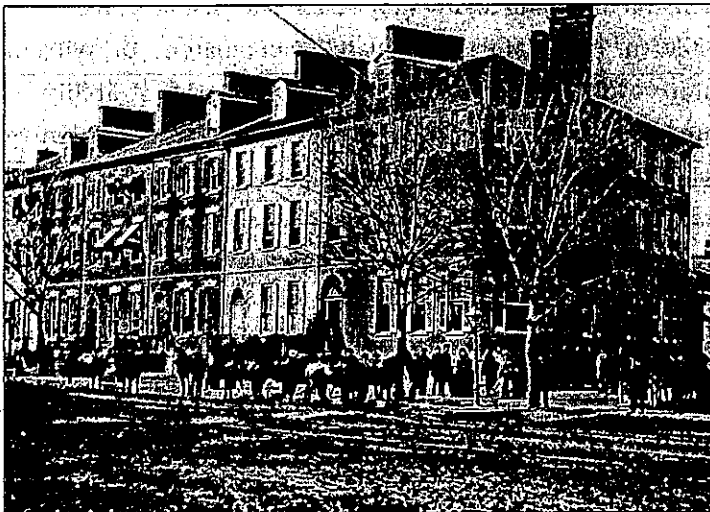
• Write a narrative poem about land speculation or a speculator in early Washington City based on what you have learned from reading this chapter.



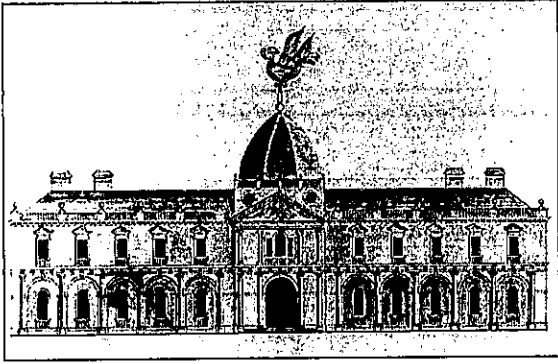
Blodgett's Hotel



Lottery ticket for the improvement of the federal city



The "Seven Buildings" near Pennsylvania Avenue and 19th Street, NW, at the time of the Civil War (left) and the two remaining buildings in 1996



The design contest for the Capitol attracted professional architects and amateur designers. This design with a rooster on the top of the dome was proposed by James Diamond.

hopes of the city's promoters were dashed. The national capital also gained a reputation as a bad place to invest funds.

Because little sizable investment occurred in the new city, its growth was painfully slow. Officials had prepared a strict construction code for housing. It allowed for no frame or wooden permanent dwellings. These regulations had to be modified to accommodate the hundreds of low-income artisans and laborers who needed to be housed. After the change the majority of new houses were built of wood and scattered through different sections of the city. The wave of speculation was over by the late 1790s.

Building the President's House and the U.S. Capitol

Despite the poor financial condition of the city and federal governments, President Washington insisted that construction of the President's House and the Capitol go forward. Before beginning construction, officials had to choose an architect and a design. A competition was held for both buildings. Different architects were invited to submit drawings and plans. The president and commissioners planned to evaluate the designs, choose a winner, and award prizes. Several competitors, including Thomas Jefferson, sent proposals for the President's House. James Hoban, an immigrant from Ireland, won the contest by presenting a handsome, European-looking mansion. His plan had to be reduced, however, because so little money was available for building.

The contest to choose the Capitol's designer turned out to be much more complicated. Rivalry between architects was intense. The plan of a Frenchman, Stephen Hallet, was first accepted, then turned down. The final winning plan, by an amateur, Dr. William Thornton, took the prize. Not being a professional architect, Thornton could not supervise the construction. Appointed to supervise, Hallet tried to "improve" Thornton's design. This led to endless disputes, and Hallet was dismissed in 1794. After other men were brought in and dismissed, James Hoban was finally called from the President's House to supervise construction. It was a great day in September 1793 when George Washington joined in an elaborate Masonic ceremony to lay the Capitol's cornerstone.

Construction on both of these public buildings proceeded extremely slowly. Since Congress would not appropriate public money, materials could not be paid for and laborers could not be

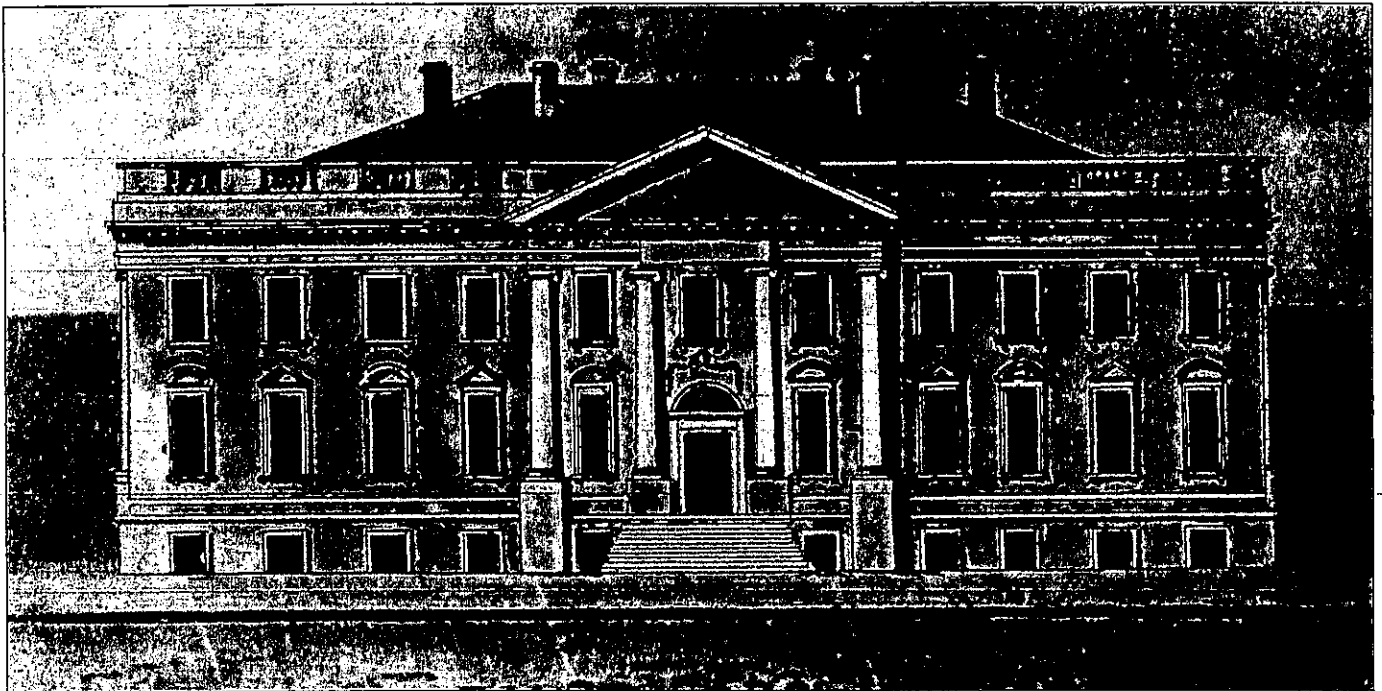
given wages. Stone workers from Germany, Scotland, and Ireland were hired to help lay stone and cut decorations for the two buildings. Many free black men and skilled slaves also worked on the President's House and the Capitol. But before long they found themselves laid off. Funds had run out. The unstable employment situation on federal construction was the cause of much hardship among the workers and their families. Some resorted to begging while others left town.

These construction projects were incomplete even when the federal government moved to Washington in 1800. Of the Capitol, only the north wing was substantially finished. Foundations of the south wing were in place and some additional work had been done. As for the President's House, its first occupants, President John Adams and his wife, Abigail Adams, found the walls freshly plastered. However, only a few rooms were livable. The main stairway and other facilities had not been installed. Outside, shanties occupied by construction laborers were thrown up against the building's exterior walls.

The Capital City in 1800

The transfer of the federal government from Philadelphia to Washington took place in the spring and summer of 1800. One hundred and thirty-one officials—the entire government—came

The President's House as it looked in 1807



WASHINGTON: THE CAPITAL CITY



Abigail Adams, wife of President John Adams, was the first presidential wife to serve in Washington. She wrote about her impressions of the city shortly after she arrived in November 1800.

Nov. 21, 1800

Arrived about one o'clock at this place known by the name of the city, and the name is all that you can call so. As I expected to find a new country, with Houses scattered over a space of ten miles, and trees and stumps in plenty, with a castle or a house, so I found in

The President's House is in a beautiful situation in front of which is the Potomac with a view of Alexandria. The country round is romantic but a wild wilderness at present.

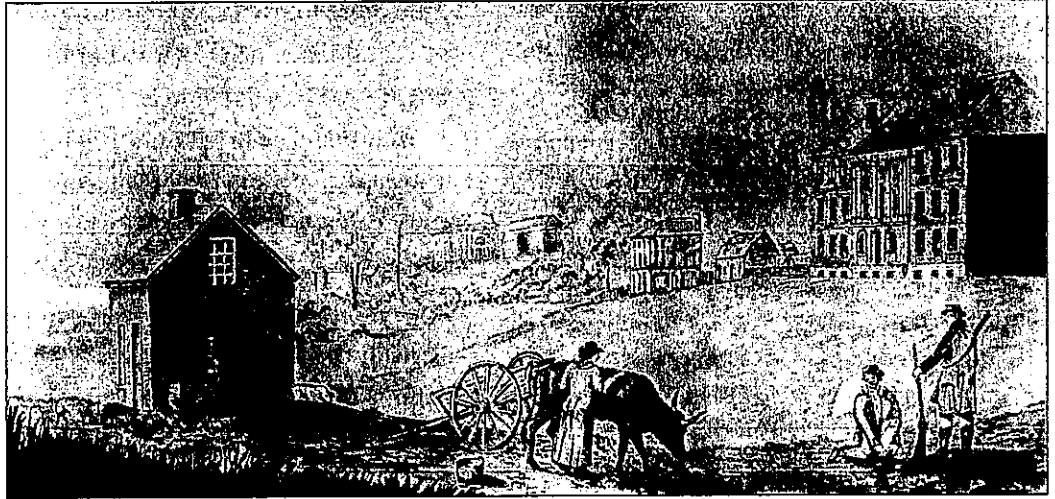
But surrounded with forests can you believe that wood is not to be had because people cannot be found to cut and carry. Brasier entered into a contract with a man to supply him with wood. But a few cords only has he been able to get. We have had some very

cold weather and we feel it keenly. This House is twice as large as our meeting House. I believe the great Hall is as big. I am sure 'tis twice as long. Cut your coat according to your cloth. But this House is built for ages to come. The establishment necessary is a task which cannot be born by the present salary. Nobody can form an idea of it but those who come into it. I had much rather live in the house at Philadelphia. Not one room or chamber is finished of the whole. It is habitable by fires in every part, thirteen of which we are obliged to keep daily, or sleep in wet and damp places. To assist us in this great castle, and render less attendance necessary, bells are wholly wanting, not one single one being hung through the whole house, and promises are all you can obtain. This is so great an inconvenience that I know not what to do!

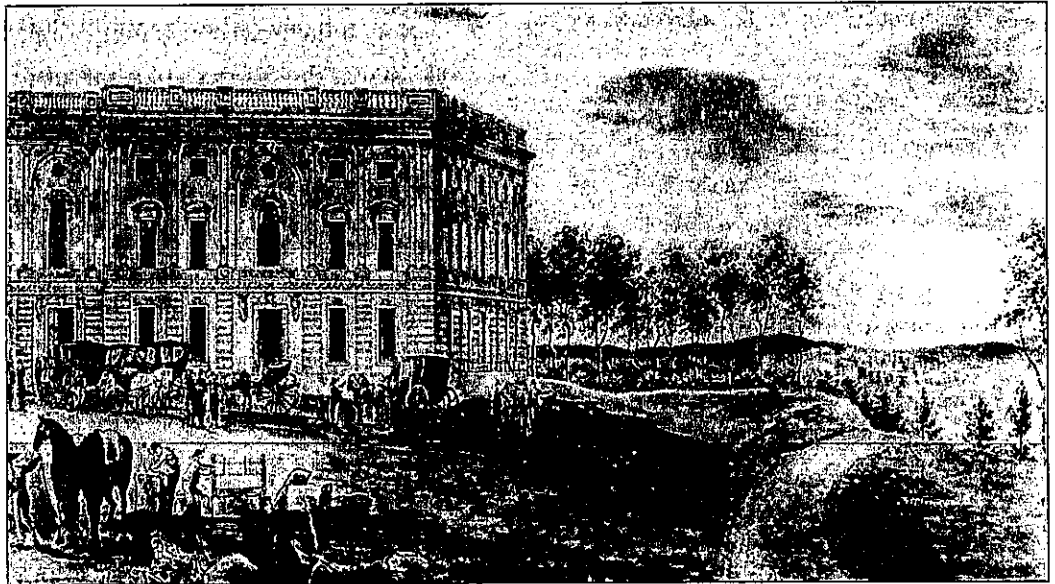
The ladies from Georgetown and in the city have many of them visited me. Yesterday I returned fifteen visits—but such a place as Georgetown! I felt all that Mrs. Cranch described when she was a resident there. It is the very dirtiest Hole I ever saw for a place of any trade or respectability of inhabitants. It is only one mile from me, but a quagmire after every rain. Here we are obliged to send daily for marketing. The capitol is near two miles from us. As to roads, we shall make them by frequent passing before winter! But I am determined to be satisfied and content, to say nothing of inconvenience, etc. That must be a worse place than even George Town that I could not reside in for three months if they will put me up some bells and let me have wood enough to keep fires. I design to be pleased. We have not the least fence-yard or other convenience without, and the great unfinished audience-room I make a drying room, or to hang the clothes in. The principal stairs are not up and will not be this winter. There are six chambers made comfortable. And two lower rooms, one for a common parlor and one for a levee room. And upstairs there is the oval room which is designed for the drawing-room, and has the crimson furniture in it. It is a very handsome room now, but when completed it will be beautiful.

Keep all this to yourself, and when asked how I like it, say that I wrote you the situation is beautiful, which is true!

A watercolor by Nicholas King, the city surveyor, done in 1803, when the city was only three years old



The Capitol shortly after the federal government moved to Washington



with their families. Their baggage was carried by ship, wagon, and coach. Boxes and wooden crates stuffed with files and forms followed them. President and Mrs. Adams arrived in November. Congress, made up of 106 representatives and 32 senators, held its first session in the unfinished Capitol in the late fall.

Many newcomers to Washington were disappointed with what they saw. The new city lacked many conveniences available at earlier seats of government, notably Philadelphia and New York City. To many members of the government, the capital seemed less a city than a thinly settled, somewhat sleepy, rural community. "A few scattered hamlets, many miles remote from each other, compose all that has risen of the promised metropolis," wrote Charles Ingersoll. Few streets had as yet been cut through the woods that dotted the site. Pennsylvania Avenue, one congressman wrote, was

• After looking at the pictures of Washington and reading Abigail Adams's letter, what impressions do you have of the young city?

• If you had just looked at the L'Enfant Plan and read L'Enfant's letter to President Washington, would you have different ideas? Why or why not?

FOR REVIEW

1. Discuss the following statement: "The differing attitudes in the new states of the North and South made it difficult to find a location for the capital city."

2. Write a brief paragraph about the differences among the roles Andrew Ellicott, Benjamin Banneker, and Pierre L'Enfant played in planning the federal district.

3. Write one or two sentences describing how each of the following relates to the development of the federal district:

The Residence Act of 1790	sectionalism
planned city	James Hoban
speculation	commissioners
fall line	David Burnes

4. On an outline map of the District of Columbia, locate the following:

the fall line	Tiber Creek
the boundaries of old Washington City	Carrollsbury
Jenkins Hill	Hamburgh
the President's House	Rock Creek

BE CREATIVE

Write a newspaper article dated February 1792 with the headline "Commissioners Furious; L'Enfant Dismissed; City Plans in Disarray."

OR

Write a play about "Land and the Federal District." Some of the scenes might be about George Washington and David Burnes, Pierre L'Enfant having the Carroll mansion torn down, or Samuel Blodgett's rifle. Use your imagination.

little more than "a deep morass, covered with alder bushes." People complained that it was hard to find rooms in the city's few boardinghouses and hotels.

An inventory listed only 109 brick and 263 wooden buildings. The census of 1800 counted just over 3,000 people in Washington City. This population was scattered widely, with occasional small clusters of buildings. The absence of many streets, fences, and gardens made the area appear to be open country. However, other parts of the federal district were more built up. Alexandria, with some 5,000 residents in 1800, was booming because of a thriving wheat trade. Georgetown's population numbered 3,000. Both port towns had several well-built brick buildings. Their waterfronts were lively and their warehouses filled.

Not all the newcomers found fault with the capital. Many were pleased at the district's natural setting and found much that was beautiful. In the sense of being a man-made environment, however, the capital left much to be desired. A rough, raw, incomplete town, the new settlement presented little or no evidence of its future urban destiny.